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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 000618

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STATE PASS SENATE FOR SENATOR LIEBERMAN

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [OVIP](#) [CH](#) [JA](#) [SN](#) [KN](#)
SUBJECT: MANAGE CHINA'S RISE CAREFULLY, FM YEO TELLS
SENATOR LIEBERMAN

REF: SINGAPORE 586

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia L. Herbold, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo told Senator Joseph Lieberman May 30 that strong U.S. engagement in the Asia-Pacific was essential to managing China's peaceful rise. Absent a strong U.S. presence, China's near neighbors might fear its expansionism. In Southeast Asia, countries would need to accommodate China as it asserted its prerogatives, limiting their freedom. Describing his visit this month to North Korea, FM Yeo said the DPRK's deep mistrust of China might explain its interest in relations with "non-threatening" countries like Singapore. Noting parallels in the Middle East, the Senator observed that surface political ties sometimes obscured deep historical enmities. He argued that the next U.S. Administration should strengthen alliances and pay close attention to the Asia-Pacific region. In a brief separate meeting, Defence Minister Teo highlighted our close bilateral military ties as a "concrete expression" of Singapore's belief that strong U.S. presence is essential for regional peace and stability. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Senator Lieberman said he looked forward to participating in the Shangri-La Dialogue May 30 - June 1 in Singapore. The Dialogue had developed into a premier forum for discussing Asia-Pacific security issues. He expressed admiration for Singapore's achievements and appreciation for our close bilateral security partnership. The Senator observed that U.S. ties in the Asia-Pacific were in good shape overall, but that the policy discussion in the United States since 9/11 had focused on Iraq and Afghanistan. Whoever was elected as the next U.S. president should give the region the attention it deserves.

Managing China's Rise - Strong U.S. Engagement Essential

¶3. (C) FM Yeo said the Shangri-La Dialogue provided "neutral ground" where China and the Western powers, among others, could discuss security issues. He warmly praised an opinion piece the Senator co-authored with Senator John McCain that appeared May 27 in the Asia Wall Street Journal calling for strengthened U.S. engagement in Asia. FM Yeo said the central question for Asia in the next century would be China's rise and how the United States would deal with it.

If China's insecurities were managed properly, it would pull itself out of poverty and become connected with the rest of the world. If not, the consequences would be "incalculable."

Likening China to an adolescent, FM Yeo described world reactions to developments in Tibet and the Olympics as "formative experiences" that would influence its attitude toward the outside world. China's would be much harder to influence as "an adult," he said.

14. (C) FM Yeo stressed that strong U.S. engagement was essential to maintain balance in the region. China's thinking that the United States was weakening could lead to instability. China's history of being invaded when it was weak had given it a preoccupation with wanting to keep its borders calm. China's near neighbors worry that without a strong U.S. presence China could become expansionist, FM Yeo said. In Southeast Asia, "we don't think so," but a growing China would "insist on its prerogatives" and countries in the region would feel the need to accommodate. If the United States and China developed as two "equal poles," however, other countries would feel more secure and have "more freedom."

15. (C) The Senator mentioned that he had been impressed with opinion pieces by Singapore founding father Lee Kuan Yew warning that defeat in Iraq would have consequences in Southeast Asia. If the United States retreated now, the Senator said, it would not only mean victory for Iran and Al Qaeda; it would also undermine U.S. credibility throughout the Arab world and beyond. The Senator said that during his visit to Japan, he had sensed "real worries" that the United

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States was drawing too close to China. Based on history, some of Japan's fears of China seemed "fantastic," he said, but the next U.S. Administration nevertheless needed to bolster our alliances. That said, conflict with China is "not inevitable."

North Korea - A Strange Place

16. (C) FM Yeo told the Senator of his visit earlier this month to North Korea, which he described as a "strange place" (reftel). Traveling hundreds of miles by car and train, FM Yeo said he had the impression there was not enough food, though he saw no signs of famine. He saw few machines or farm animals and the hillsides were denuded, apparently having been stripped of trees for firewood. Yet the country was remarkably clean and orderly, FM Yeo said, and the people were hardworking and warm "once you got to know them."

17. (C) FM Yeo recalled that he had wondered why his North Korean counterpart had repeatedly asked about training and medical care in Singapore, given that similar services were readily available in China. Then it occurred to him that the North Koreans saw Singapore as "non-threatening." A Korean businessman had explained to him that the North Koreans hate the Chinese, apparently because they fear China will control them, despite the fact that some two hundred thousand Chinese had died fighting for the North in the Korean War. The Senator observed that it is easy to misunderstand such relationships if you only look at political connections. Some people assume that Iraq's current government could easily fall under Iranian influence due to their ties as fellow Shia Muslims, but there are deep historical and even personal strains between them. Similarly, many Palestinians feel that Arab neighbors have not treated them well or with respect.

Defence Minister Teo

18. (C) In a brief separate meeting with Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean, Senator Lieberman reiterated his admiration for Singapore's development and appreciation for our close

bilateral strategic partnership, which he described as important to the United States. Def Min Teo recalled the development of the relationship starting in the 1970's and culminating with the 2005 bilateral Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), which provided enhanced U.S. military access in Singapore and strengthened strategic cooperation. The SFA was a "concrete expression" of Singapore's belief that a strong U.S. regional presence is essential for peace and stability in the region.

¶9. (C) Def Min Teo repeated FM Yeo's praise for the Senator's joint May 27 opinion piece with Senator McCain calling for strong U.S. engagement in Asia. The Senator responded that the United States considers itself a Pacific power and said he thought the importance of Asia was well understood at the leadership level in the United States. Unfortunately, 9/11 had intervened to direct our attention to the Middle East. Even so, he thought the United States had the capacity to look after its interests in both regions. Def Min Teo said that Singaporeans were following the U.S. election with great interest since, he claimed, the outcome probably has as great an effect on "the man in the street" in Singapore as in middle America.

¶10. (U) Codel Lieberman cleared this message.

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